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Russians Will Back Putin, No Matter the Cost

By Georgy Bovt

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The more the Ukrainian crisis escalates toward full-scale war, the higher President Vladimir Putin's ratings continue to climb. In fact, after 14 years in power, Putin is more popular now than ever before, a unique phenomenon in modern politics.

According to a Gallup poll published last week, Russians expressed satisfaction with just about every aspect of their lives into which sociologists typically inquire: the government, their degree of personal freedom and the state of the economy.

Russians are even satisfied with the current condition of the electoral system, despite earlier skepticism. Putin's job approval rating has soared by 30 percent in the past year alone, now reaching 83 percent. As many as 73 percent of Russians believe the country is on the right course, and 78 percent expressed confidence in the army's battle-readiness.

And although Russians have been skeptical of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and of government in general — as illustrated by the old adage that the tsar is good but the boyars

are bad — 64 percent of Russians now approve of their government. Whereas last year only 23 percent of respondents believed that elections were fair, this year that number suddenly jumped to 39 percent.

What's more, 65 percent believe they live in a free country, and about the same majority thinks the economic situation is better this year than last, despite the fact that last year saw only about 1.5 percent growth and this year the economy is likely headed toward recession.

It is not difficult to guess that the rise in optimism is attributable to Putin's wildly popular decision to annex Crimea and the stepped-up patriotic propaganda Russia unleashed as it effectively went to war against Ukraine. At least, that is how most people perceive it, seeing that Moscow is far from a neutral party in the conflict.

Such propaganda is standard procedure for any country directly or even indirectly fighting a war. During the first war with Iraq, former U.S. President George Bush, Sr. enjoyed voter approval ratings of about 80 percent, although that did not prevent him from losing the presidential elections only a short time later.

Odd as it might seem to an outside observer, ordinary Russians are generally unconcerned about the many prohibitory and restrictive laws that have been the focus of media attention and social networks lately. This is not because those people live in a parallel reality, although Russians' political involvement has reached an unprecedented low, but because those laws, in all their severity and, at times, absurdity, do not affect the average Russian personally. Or else, they can find ways to get around those laws.

This is especially true of the most outlandish new laws that always grab the biggest headlines. The average Russian might rightfully ask: "How would my life change tomorrow if the authorities were to impose a strict ban on lace panties?" In fact, the more absurd the ban, the faster people will find a way to get around it in their daily lives. And even those laws that the authorities do enforce more systematically — albeit, while making plenty of the usual exceptions — they generally have little or no impact on people's lives.

That is why all of these bans and tighter restrictions generate so little attention from the masses.

After all, does the fact that bloggers with more than 3,000 subscribers and people holding dual citizenship must now register with the authorities mean that vodka, beer, potatoes and toilet paper will disappear from store shelves tomorrow? No. And will rent and utilities fees double because leaders have essentially made organizing and participating in opposition rallies a punishable crime and effectively made it impossible for NGOs to function if they are not loyal to the Kremlin? Again, the answer is no. The average Russian, consequently, views this torrent of prohibitions and restrictions as one more inevitable and natural phenomenon, like rain in summer and snow in winter.

These sorts of laws are an indispensable part of Russian life, a given. And that is why, when asked by the Gallop pollster whether he is happy with the level of freedom in the country, the average Russian can honestly and without hesitation answer: "Yes, very." After all, society seems no worse now than it has always been. People react to many of the prohibitions according to the principle: "It will not affect me."

The threat of stricter economic sanctions against Russia is not likely to change this attitude. Given Russia's rich totalitarian tradition, the sanctions might even serve to rally the people against the foreign threat.

Iran's precedent show that economic hardships resulting from Western sanctions do not necessarily turn the anger of the people against the government. Even now, after several years of the most severe sanctions, the Iranian ruling class does not rush to capitulate to the West's main demands concerning the country's nuclear program. Instead, Tehran tries to maneuver for political advantage by exploiting the rift between Washington and Moscow.

Given the way public opinion trends evolve in Russia, exactly the same thing could happen here. The more pressure the international community applies, the stronger the anti-Western sentiment will become and the higher Putin's ratings will climb.

As a result, within a few years the anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiment in Russia could reach levels that would make the Soviet Union look like an old and dear friend to the West. There is only one alternative: The West must urgently find a compromise on the Ukrainian question, recognizing that Russia and its interests cannot be pushed to the sidelines and that the desire to deliver a humiliating defeat to Moscow will only intensify the conflict.

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